

Minutes
Council of Economic Advisors
Wednesday, June 15, 2020, 9:00 a.m.
Zoom Meeting ID 872-6836-0733

Members Present: Adam Block, Tina Burgos, Glen Cammarano, Bill Day, Virginia Fleisher, Maurice Handel, Robert Hentschel, Adam Meixner, David Montgomery, Rick Putprush, Matthew Talcoff, Michael Wilcox

Members Absent: Stuart Agler; Anne Marie Dowd; Ted Owens

Others Present: Lee Newman, Director of Planning and Community Development; Daphne Collins, Zoning Specialist; Tim McDonald, Director of Public Health; Greg Reibman, President of the Newton-Needham Regional Chamber of Commerce; Katie King, Assistant Town Manager.

Adam Block, Chair, opened the meeting at 9:00 a.m.

1. Minutes of May 13, 2020

Mr. Handel moved to adopt the Minutes of May 13, 2020. Mr. Hentschel seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

2. COVID19 State of Emergency – Needham Business

a. Issues and Concerns/ Phase II, Part 1

Mr. Block said that the Town of Needham adopted policies that are supportive of restaurants by allowing public areas to be available for outdoor seating.

Ms. Burgos reported that the business opening under Phase II, Part 1 has been generally slow. Communication to the public about the opening has been tricky. Businesses are faced with the challenge of limiting the number of patrons allowed in the premises and managing the additional cleaning and sanitation protocols. Reports from her business neighbors was that the opening overall was hit or miss. She found that automobile traffic has increased but pedestrian traffic is lackluster. She thought the business community was adequately prepared with sanitizing products and PPE for the employees and customers. Prior to opening, businesses hired companies to conduct deep cleans.

She stated that the designation of some parking spots for curbside business was helpful as some businesses are still not allowing customers into their shops. She noted that businesses are prepared but customer comfort levels are still evolving.

Businesses were continuing to provide curbside, deliveries and shipping services.

Mr. Reibman reported that hand sanitizing wipes are difficult to find but that PPE and signage is adequate. Overall, the initial phased opening has been positive. He indicated that Newton adopted a policy similar to Needham's permitting restaurant to expand into the sidewalk and to provide sidewalk merchandizing. Over 40 restaurants have been permitted. He thought it was too early to determine the economic impact of the recent weekend opening.

Mr. Putpush thought requiring customers to purchase merchandize was a disincentive for customers and challenging for clothing retailers. Ms. Burgos responded that the return policy was honored for ecommerce and curbside business.

Mr. Block informed that the Town Manager was empowered by the Select Board to issue outdoor seating permits to restaurants in public areas. He hoped to receive a status report at the next meeting on the expanded outdoor seating policy. Mr. Reibman was supportive of the expanded outdoor seating into public parking areas as sidewalks sometimes have inadequate space allowances for pedestrian and handicapped access and social distancing. He thought these new policies provide an opportunity to evaluate the impact of these innovations on downtown areas.

Mr. Reibman inquired if Needham's expanded policy allowed for sidewalk merchandizing. Mr. Handel responded that the expanded policy was not explicit for merchandizing. He thought that as long as the required 48" is provided for pedestrian and handicapped access they would be open to such a proposal.

Mr. Handel along with another member of the Select Board met with Chapel Street restauranteurs -Rice Barn, Cook, Bagels Best, and Gary – to discuss using Chapel Street parking spaces for outdoor seating. There was collaboration and support among the businesses. The main issue is relocating the joint dumpster in the area. Mr. Handel requested input from the members and to provide ideas and solutions to Sandy Cincotta scincotta@needhamma.gov in the Town Manager's Office. Mr. Handel requested that Rick Merson, Director of the Department of Public Works assist in the relocation of the dumpsters.

Mr. Block reported that the Commonwealth had allocated five million dollars for grants to municipalities to make improvements to facilitate and stimulate commercial activities. Mr. Handel responded that the Town is looking into grant opportunities. He requested that any information regarding grant opportunities be forwarded to Ms. Cincotta. Ms. Newman stated that the Town is aware of the grant and that the Town is considering it for jersey barriers to create safe outdoor seating areas in parking lots and on-street parking spaces.

Mr. McDonald reported that this Phase is the phase that allows 25% capacity in office spaces. He informed that the Town of Needham allows for 25% capacity in its public buildings based on an adopted phased plan. If there is a need for more than 25% capacity, authorization from the Public Health Department is required. All Town Building are open to the public with an appointment.

During Phase III more business industries will be opened. The 25% capacity is not expected to increase. The opening is dependent on the Covid19 trends and the Commonwealth's trajectory.

Mr. Reibman informed that office buildings have been opened for a month. However, many have chosen not to open and to have employees work remotely from home. TripAdvisor does not expect to open until the Fall. This trend is replicated at most office parks and will impact associated restaurant openings and their bottom line. It's a challenge for small retail restaurants to open at a reduced capacity and be profitable. The required social distancing is difficult for small restaurants. Many do not have the necessary six feet apart between tables.

Mr. Meixner reported that beginning in late May inquiries for leasing office space in the suburbs has increased. Sales of commercial spaces is slower reflective of the uncertainty in the economy.

Mr. Putprush asked if the inquiries were from Boston businesses. Mr. Meixner has been seeing interest from Boston brokers and for short-term. Most downtown companies hold long term leases. According to Mr. Putprush, forecasts indicate that business are looking to locate much of their office space needs in the suburbs because of social distancing requirements, transportation precautions, traffic and square foot costs while maintaining a reduced presence in the downtown for their flagship location. Mr. Meixner thought there was a market for companies to create satellite locations in the suburbs for their employees who are uncomfortable with taking public transportation. High density workspaces are no longer possible because of the space needed for social distancing. Looking for additional space in the suburbs is more cost effective than obtaining additional square footage in the downtown. The suburban office buildings with their 5-story max are more attractive than tall downtown buildings which require an elevator ride that is problematic because of social distancing requirements. From an office standpoint the Needham-Newton office market is well positioned.

Mr. Reibman was concerned about the return to office space without schools, daycare and childcare. He thought the preliminary childcare regulations were onerous and restrictive making it nearly impossible for childcare providers to open. Providers will not be able to bring back their numbers to satisfy the demand or to make their operational margins.

Mr. Hentschel concurred. He said that the Commonwealth reported that some providers will not survive under the new restrictions. He was concerned about negative impact on the career advances made by women and on women-owned businesses if the childcare issue is not resolved. He thought the education hiatus was devastating on children and that schools need to open in the Fall. He thought the data on the impact of Covid19 did not indicate the cautionary opening of the sector. Mr. Reibman suggested that the same focus in adopting policies to support the restaurant industry be explored for the daycare industry.

Mr. McDonald noted that Covid19 is not benign on school age children and that some develop long term effects from the virus. To institute safety procedures to keep the children population safe is more difficult than for adults.

Mr. Wilcox reported that lab space is the one area that has been little affected by the pandemic and continues to grow.

Mr. Reibman noted that the health and fitness business segment has been seriously impacted by the pandemic and needs attention as well. They are scheduled to open in Phase III. Meeting the industry regulations are very challenging for the many small businesses and their employees.

3. Farmers Market

Mr. Handel reported that the Farmers Market opened over the weekend. He said there were very few vendors and customers. Mr. Handel attributed the low attendance to the signage which was unclear about the opening date. He thought it would pick-up with time.

4. Industrial Zoning

a. HC1 – Update

Ms. Newman reported Town Meeting appropriated \$60,000 to conduct plans for the HC1 zoning. The first study will be a traffic analysis which will be the foundational piece for the Urban Design Plan. Because of the pandemic, the study will not gather new traffic data and will be modeled based on traffic data collected by the Commonwealth prior to the pandemic to provide a more realistic scenario on Highland Avenue and Gould Street. The Highway Department also conducted traffic counts on Central Avenue and Gould Street which will also be used in the study.

b. Children’s Hospital

Ms. Newman reported that the redevelopment of Children’s Hospital was going forward. The rezoning of this project was approved at the Spring Town Meeting.

5. IDG

Mr. Block reported that IDG is moving into the space vacated by the PTC. IDG is scheduled to move 600 employees by January 2021. Mr. Wilcox highlighted that IDG is not renting the entire 125,000 square feet.

Mr. Wilcox noted that TripAdvisor is looking to sublet 100,000 square feet of their top two floors. The sublet is likely at \$40 per square foot depending but could be negotiable based on tenant improvements needed.

Mr. Handel inquired if consideration of the eating amenities at TripAdvisor and IDG could be open to public patronage. Ms. Newman and Mr. Block will bring the issue to the Planning Board for consideration.

6. Planning and Development Department Businesses Permits Issued

Planning Board - Ms. Newman reported that Spiga Ristorante, 18 Highland Circle, is looking to place a permanent tent structure to provide three season outdoor seating. The tent will have a

retractable system and is the first of its type in Needham. The petition is scheduled to go before the Planning Board and ZBA.

ZBA - Ms. Collins reported that the ZBA issued a Special Permit for the installation of antennas for the Police and Fire public safety communications system at the Wireless Communications Tower at 350 Cabot Street. She also noted that the ZBA has issued the first Special Permit for an Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) at 153 Central Avenue. An additional Special Permit Application for an ADU at 52 Coulton Park is scheduled for June.

7. Economic Development Management Recruitment Status

Ms. King reported that the first round of interviews for the Economic Development Manager were completed. The second round is expected sometime in June.

8. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 10:15 a.m.